

***Palatable: Authenticity, Identity, and Social Media***

**An Honors Thesis (AFA 487)**

by

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## Abstract

This collection of work examines the interaction between identity, authenticity and social media. Within the context of social media, the value of beauty is considered, and the influence of the makeup and fashion industries is questioned. Coming from the perspective of a young woman, this work also considers the way that social media works to reinforce the necessitation of beauty for women within our culture.

The impact of social media has grown substantially in recent years, influencing the mentalities of those who use it. Idealized versions of individuals take precedence on these platforms and are encouraged by social media “influencers” who advertise the idealized self as if it were a reality. Those who use social media internalize these standards of perfection and learn to mirror them. Shame grows from an inability to meet these standards of perfection and, as a result, it becomes necessary to hide the reality of the self. These two aspects of the self, the idealized self and the self we hide, reflect the persona and the shadow aspects of Carl Jung’s model of the psyche. Jung believed that both aspects of the self must be accepted in order for growth to be possible. Together this project explores the complexities of the whole self, both the persona and the shadow, and questions the influence that social media has on the acceptance of that self.

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## Process Analysis Statement

Growing up in the age of social media, where the beauty and fashion industries are more prominent than ever, “influencers” have the power to alter how we perceive our own identities and the identities of others. We often see the idealized version of an individual and internalize those standards, eventually learning to mirror them and become our own idealized version of ourselves. In doing so we stray from the reality of the self to focus on a perfected, albeit unsustainable, version. I am interested in the conflict that lies between the idealized self and the parts of the self that we work to hide.

Carl Jung believed in the idea of the human psyche. This he described as “the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious” (Jung, 1921). Jung believed that there were two particular aspects of the human psyche that necessitated balance in order for growth to occur. One of these aspects is the Persona which describes the idealized self. This self is the self that an individual presents to the world, often as a result of convenience and/or survival. If an individual becomes consumed with their Persona the other aspects of the self may not be able to grow. In viewing social media this focus on the Persona can be seen. Both the beauty and the fashion industries play a prominent role within social media. They can be seen in advertisements and makeup tutorials online. The Persona can also be seen through filters and apps like *Facetune*. What lies opposite of the Persona are the things that are not shown on social media. These are the parts of the self that individuals wish to hide. They represent the other aspect of the psyche. This other aspect is called the Shadow. The Shadow might be represented by acne covered skin or yellowed teeth. Those who do not acknowledge their Shadow can become overly

consumed with the concern for the opinions of others. Jung necessitated an acknowledgement of the Shadow in order to achieve its balance with the Persona.

The images that I am creating mix aspects of authenticity with inauthenticity. There are brief moments of clarity through detail layered over ambiguous watercolor washes. Each piece contains partial portraits of females and shows a combination of flaws and means of perfecting them. Each portrait is drawn over a watercolor wash with a variety of mediums. Most commonly used are colored pencils, soft pastels, ink, and acrylic paint. Once drawn, text is added over top of some of the images. The text is taken from my personal journals and becomes the most honest part of the piece. I intend to create 40 - 50 of these images at three different sizes.

A prominent aspect of these works are the color palettes used within them. The majority of the colors used are bright and saturated. These color palettes work to achieve two main things. The first use of the saturated colors creates a link between the image and social media. Instagram and Snapchat filters, makeup ads, and fashion ads all help inform which colors will be used. The other main use of the saturated colors is the way that it distorts the figure from a sense of reality. A certain sense of humanity becomes lost and instead the figure is made into a spectacle. In becoming a spectacle, the self is objectified and identity becomes traded in for the sake of visual consumption.

### **Significance/Relevance**

When I was in high school, I became consumed by the need to perfect my image in an effort to feel validated by others. In doing so I was focusing on the Persona aspect of myself. I learned how to perform for society and in doing so alienated myself from what I was to a version of myself that was expected of me. John Berger discussed this idea of female performance in his

book *Ways of Seeing*. He presented the concept that women learn two roles in their lives, one of the *surveyor* and the other of the *surveyed*. In doing so women are constantly surveying the way that they appear to the world (Berger, 2008). This surveyal likely arose from the power imbalances that have existed between men and women. Men, having more rights and more access to money, were placed in a position where women were at their mercy. In more recent times we have begun to move away from these traditional roles, but that power imbalance between men and women still exists and thus women are still taught that it is their duty to be attractive. Currently ideas of self-love are encouraged on most social media platforms and even in some advertising. This idea itself has the potential to positively impact the way that women perceive themselves, but it is often framed within the context of empowerment through beauty. It is not uncommon to see individuals posting selfies in which they feel they look beautiful, attractive, etc. and tagging them with hashtags like “selflove.” The issue with this form of self-love is that it continues to necessitate some form of beauty from women in order to feel good about themselves.

One such example of this body positivity movement is Dove’s “Real Beauty” ad campaign. This ad campaign involves the promotion of self-love through feeling beautiful. Dove’s campaign focus on recontextualizing society’s perception of what makes an individual beautiful by becoming more inclusive. Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign includes women of different sizes, races, and, while this campaign positively reinforces good feelings for women surrounding their image, it still demands that women value their physical appearance. I am interested in the idea that the importance of being beautiful and even *feeling* beautiful should no longer exist as a “duty” that all women feel responsible to perform. Instead, the reality of self should have the opportunity to be exposed without its beauty being necessitated.

Within the context of contemporary art, the value of beauty is approached differently than it is in cases noted above. In contemporary art the value of beauty is continually challenged. Art no longer relies on aestheticism and this project reflects that sentiment. That being said, this work does not entirely dismiss the idea that beauty has some value. Instead it questions the importance of that value compared to other aspects of the self. Jung was not dismissive of the Persona and instead stated that it should be balanced with the Shadow. The want to be and feel beautiful has become so ingrained in women by our society that to call it an inauthentic aspect of us seems wrong to do. That want is something deeply felt and deeply real and the dissonance between this ingrained value and, as the saying goes, “beauty isn’t everything,” is a common point of conflict for women today.

I intend for this show to emphasize the importance of personal authenticity within a society that has little appreciation for it. At present society has a tendency to claim that it values authenticity but in reality it only values “correct” authenticity. The nature of consumerism encourages lifestyle ideals related to physical appearances that are promoted on platforms like social media, television, and advertisements. There is a deep need for us to re-examine the subject of personal authenticity and its existence, or lack thereof, in our lives. If the self is to be examined through Jung’s concept of the psyche it can be seen that the self contains complexities (the Persona and the Shadow). Acceptance of these complexities can allow for an individual to gain a greater sense of self-perception. Through this better understanding and acceptance of the realities of the self, Jung would say that the individual has developed a greater opportunity for growth. This growth will allow for the individual’s subsequent interactions with themselves and with the world around them to have the potential to change for the better.

## Influences



**Fig. 1.** Rook, F. (2011). *Shadow* [Black glue and wires].

Rook Floro is a contemporary artist that works with aspects of Jungian psychology to create new ways of visualizing the psyche. His piece, *Shadow*, illustrates Jung's concept of the "Shadow" aspect of the persona. With this work Floro both separates and connects the "Shadow" from the self, offering a different way of understanding this concept. Although I have not drawn from the visual aspects of this piece I am interested in the conceptual ones. Floro divides the self in order to understand it. With my own work, I also both divide and connect the self in an effort to understand and convey the reality of the psyche.



**Fig. 2.** Harris, A. (2010). *Portrait (Pink Eyelid)* [Oil on linen covered panel].

Anne Harris is another contemporary artist whose work I am inspired by. With her series *Phantasmatical* Harris created self-portraits, as I am doing. These portraits were created not to be visually representative of her own image, but rather to convey the feelings and emotions she harbors surrounding the issue of being both visible and invisible as a middle-aged woman. This series of paintings discusses ideas surrounding going from a young age of being looked at, to being aware of being looked at, to reaching an older age and gaining a sense of invisibility (BLOUIN ARTINFO, 2013). Each of the figures are emotionally driven and are not created to be beautiful in a traditional sense. Instead Harris has distorted their features and colors, making them look both sickly and ethereal.



**Fig. 3.** Dumas, M. (1984). *Het Kwaad is Banaal (Evil is Banal)* [Oil on canvas].

Marlene Dumas is another contemporary artist who utilizes portraiture to convey ideas. At times, such as in Figure 3, she uses her own image to discuss the role that her own identity plays within an issue. In Figure 3 Dumas distorts the colors of the figure, drawing attention to the left side of the figure's face and to her hand. Alongside color distortion, I also find Dumas' use of expression and posing to be relevant to the work that I am creating. There is a great deal that can be alluded to through the way that a figure expresses emotion.





**Fig. 4.** Minter, M. (2007). *Blue Poles* [Enamel on metal].

Marilyn Minter is an artist whose works are largely influenced by pop culture. Although her work is highly political it combines these themes of activism with personal truths. I am interested in both the conceptual and visual aspects of Minter's works. She often uses bright, colorful makeup that is combined with "flaws," for example, the metallic blue eye shadow worn alongside the pimple in Figure 4. The high level of detail that Minter uses in her works mirrors the close examination with which females are both viewed and have learned to view themselves. Any work that is done to idealize the self, i.e. the blue eyeshadow, is contrasted by the flaws that women are usually taught to hide or to change.



**Fig. 5.** Pettibon, R. (2000). *I See before Me Words You Should Not Have Written* [Lithograph].

Raymond Pettibon is one of three individuals that I have been inspired by due to his use of text. Pettibon combines both image and text and the two aspects of this combination are

highly dependent on one another. The text in Figure 5 is paired with a contemplative looking portrait and hints that the figure is feeling regretful. Even so, the text is not definitive. It does not answer what the image asks, but rather offers more information that leads to viewer to ask even more questions.

Alongside Pettibon I have also been reading the works of authors like Richard Siken and Teju Cole to assist in my understanding of how text can be used to portray identity and how it can be used alongside images. The work of Siken not only explores themes of identity, but also themes of artistic representation. His second book of poetry, *War of the Foxes*, discusses the experience of both creating and viewing paintings and the role that identity plays in experiencing art. Teju Cole is another author whose work involves a connection between text and image. His book *Blind Spot* pairs essays with photographs to explore and, with a great deal of ambiguity, give insight into the interpretation of an image. When reading this text, the reader is forced to re-examine the photograph in a new way that asks new questions of it.

### **Process/Technique**

Before beginning a group of pieces, I take various reference photos. Each of these photos are of myself and within them I attempt to embody the character of an influencer. Common features of these photos are props such as lip gloss wands, perfume bottles, and sunglasses. Many of the photos focus mainly on the face, but some do focus on the body and the clothes that it wears. When I am deciding what props, clothing, poses, formats, etc. to use I like research the social media pages of prominent influencers to see what is currently popular. I also like to look at advertisements for fashion and makeup companies to assist with this. Through this research I not only find trends pertaining to fashion and makeup, but I am also able to identify color trends that

I can then use in my pieces. Once I have an idea of what an image will look like I move onto the creation of the piece.

For each of these works I either include a watercolor wash or I utilize alcohol inks. The watercolor washes are very wet and usually consist of a triad of colors. These washes are blurry and undefined and loosely define the features of the figure. When drawing is added to the pieces, either before or after the watercolors, it works to define the wash. The drawing utilizes a variety of media including colored pencils, soft pastels, ink, and graphite. At times acrylic paint is also used over these images. When I use alcohol inks, I combine them with 91% isopropyl alcohol. I also use a straw to blow the inks across the image. With alcohol inks I either use canvas that is primed with Kilz Primer or I use Yupo paper. The alcohol inks provide more saturated colors than the watercolors and do not involve as much drawing as the watercolor pieces.

Many of my images also include text. This text comes from my own writing and/or journaling. I either pull the text from journal passages that I have already written, or I create new text in response to a piece. When I create new text for a piece, I usually start the piece, then write, and then finish the piece afterward. This helps me better understand my own thoughts and feelings surrounding each image.

The display of these images will be salon style because of the large amount of them and their variations in size. Some of the pieces will be framed while others will not be. Those that are not framed will be attached to the wall with clear push pins. This style of hanging and the variations of framing and size imitates the vast amount of imagery/information that is presented to us on social media platforms. The pieces, displayed in this way, overwhelm the viewer with ideas of beauty and convention. Each piece is compared with those around it, similar to the way individuals compare themselves to those they see online.

## Description of Work



*Cologne*, mixed media, 12x12

The piece *Cologne* is one piece that I believe embodies many of the ideas this collection conveys. *Cologne* shows a figure partially distorted by a bottle of cologne. The cologne bottle represents the idealized persona aspect of the self while questioning societal expectations of convention. Through the bottle the figure is manipulated and changed, representing the alteration of the authentic self when utilizing social media. Her mouth appears larger through the bottle which distances the figure's face from conventional notions of attractiveness. That being said, the features of the figure that are not distorted by the bottle are also distanced from reality by color use and lack of definition. The eyes are defined by eyelashes that seem to be wearing mascara, but surrounding this definition are bright red and shadows of blue. These intense colors make the figure look almost look as if she has been injured. The face itself fades into the orange

surrounding it, reflecting a lack of identity that is not shaped by the shadow and the persona aspects of the self.



*Extremes*, mixed media, 22x30

The piece *Extremes* is the second I have chosen to analyze. The name of this work alludes to the various extremes that women are expected to fulfill by society. One of these societal extremes applies to beauty and can be seen in the eye, lip, and face makeup that the figure appears to be wearing. Within social media women are continually pressured to appear desirable in order to receive validation. On platforms like Instagram the image tends to take precedence over the text and so the appearance of the figure becomes the most valuable thing about her. In this piece the text works to further emulate this idea, discussing how a consumption with the persona can lead to a loss of identity.

To counter the persona's role in this piece the figure has been altered by strange colors and a lack of eyebrows. Her eyes are red and her lips green while her skin has an orange/yellow tone. These alterations make her appear almost inhuman, as if, in her extremes, she has manipulated herself past beauty and past humanity.

In its completion this project addresses the concerns I have regarding the use of social media and the way it works to reinforce a rejection of identity. Through the utilization of Carl Jung's concepts of the persona and the shadow I was able to examine the idealization of the self in the context of social media. I used my own experiences as a young woman who grew up with social media to consider my internalization of its values concerning appearance and self-conception. These values, being those that prioritize physical beauty, often do so in the pursuit of self-confidence. In creating this work, I hope to relate to others who struggle with self-acceptance as a result of societal expectations. The intention of this project is to emphasize that the idealization of the self as seen on social media platforms is not a reality. In order to grow it is imperative that we accept the wholeness of the self rather than edit and hide to fulfill societal expectations of beauty and perfection.

Images for this project can be found at <https://alexannkins.wixsite.com/alexartkins/palatable>.

## Works Referenced

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